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ABSTRACT

There is an acute need to improve the quality of classroom teachers through improved standards for preservice programs and licensure and certification, especially in the middle grades. Several Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) states are working to improve middle grades teacher quality. Some are raising standards on teacher licensure tests. Eleven SREB states mandate or fund beginning teacher induction program. There are few incentives or penalties encouraging districts and schools to recruit and assign highly qualified teachers to middle grades classrooms. A systematic approach to improving middle school teaching includes: developing a middle grades institute that spans two summers and the school year for teachers at low-performing schools; establishing new requirements for preparing and certifying middle grades teachers; and establishing dates by which all middle school teachers must meet new requirements. Three areas in which state policies can help ensure a well-qualified teacher in every classroom include: incentives for schools and colleges to collaborate to improve content knowledge and teaching practices for the middle grades; recruitment, preparation, and ongoing professional development to improve middle school teacher quality; and a clear message through licensing and certification that teacher quality is an educational priority. (SM)

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A Middle Grades Message:

A well-qualified teacher in every classroom matters

SREB

Sondra Cooney

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There is no single issue on which greater coordination between the schools and universities is needed than how to strengthen teacher education programs.

Southern Regional Education Board, 1981

Inadequate teacher preparation and licensing — and assignment for convenience — result in too many teachers in the middle grades who have too little knowledge of the subjects they teach and the best ways to teach them.

Southern Regional Education Board, 1998

For the last two decades, SREB has spoken out on the need to improve the quality of classroom teachers through improved standards for teacher-education programs and high standards for licensure and certification. That need is as acute today as it was 20 years ago — especially in the middle grades.

The middle grades dilemma

There is growing evidence that, if schools and districts want to improve achievement for all students in the middle grades, they need teachers who know what to teach and how to teach it. During the 1990s, only about 20 percent of eighth-graders in SREB states reached the proficiency level in mathematics, and fewer than one-third reached the proficiency level in reading. Even though more children attend preschool, and elementary programs have increased their focus on basic reading and mathematics, there have been no substantial gains in performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) from fourth to eighth grade. Why aren't students learning more in the middle grades? Are middle grades teachers prepared to teach the depth of content necessary to prepare students for high school in the 21st century?

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Making Middle Grades Matter, SREB's initiative to improve achievement in the middle grades, surveyed nearly 1,100 middle grades teachers in 28 schools and 13 states in the spring of 2000. Of those teachers, 30 percent have undergraduate content majors and 43 percent have elementary education majors. Compared with all teachers, the percentage of teachers in academic areas (mathematics, English, science, social studies) who have content majors is even lower. In other words, those who teach music or physical education in the middle grades have specialized content degrees. But teachers without undergraduate content majors are assigned to teach mathematics, English, science and social studies.

The survey also revealed that teachers want to upgrade their content knowledge and learn new methods of teaching content successfully to more students. However, more than 65 percent of the teachers say they have had little or no professional development aimed at expanding their academic content knowledge, and 80 percent of them report having little or no professional development on how to help low-performing students master complex content.

The Education Trust recently looked at the relationship between teacher certification and eighth-graders' achievement on the NAEP mathematics exam. Having a certified mathematics teacher made a difference in achievement in every mathematics course, particularly the most advanced courses (algebra and geometry) and the most basic or general courses. The pattern was much the same in science; students taught by science majors did better than those taught by teachers with education majors.

Each of these middle grades teachers has complied with state policies, both for preparation and certification, to teach in the middle grades. Most states have licenses that cover grades one through eight, grades seven through 12, or some variation of these two. With the elementary (grades one through eight) education major and license, teachers can be assigned to any grade and, in some states, any subject. Too often, teachers prepare for elementary or secondary teaching but then are assigned to teach the middle grades. These teachers do not want to be in the middle grades; if they do not quit teaching altogether, they likely will leave for a preferred position at a different level at the first opportunity.

What are states doing to improve teacher quality in the middle grades?

Kentucky, Maryland, South Carolina and Virginia are raising standards on teacher licensure tests. Oklahoma's new licensure test is linked to state standards. Several states are creating specific certification for the middle grades. For several decades Georgia has required a concentration for middle grades certification; the state now is upgrading to subject-specific licenses for the middle grades. Kentucky and South Carolina appointed task forces to study teacher quality in the middle grades and make recommendations. Legislation in Kentucky

> *"The first year I taught, I was just hanging on for dear life. Some days I went home determined to find another job. If it had not been for my team and my department chair, I would have quit at the end of my first year. The second year got a little easier. Finally, this year I feel that I know what to do, even if I still need help to do it."*
>
> — A Mississippi middle grades teacher

established the Teachers' Professional Growth Fund to provide teachers with tuition reimbursements and stipends for college courses and professional-development activities. Priority for funding will be given to middle school teachers through 2004. The measure also creates the Center for Middle School Academic Achievement to improve middle school teachers' content knowledge and teaching practices in core subject areas.

Teachers who quit teaching the middle grades say they did not receive administrative and professional support as they struggled with classroom management and students' lack of motivation. They report feeling isolated, unsupported and unrecognized by their peers and the community as a whole. In SREB interviews, middle grades teachers say that a caring, experienced colleague was their greatest source of support early in their careers.

Eleven SREB states either mandate or fund induction programs for beginning teachers, and 10 states do both. Five of those require a 1-to-1 ratio of mentors to beginning teachers. Kentucky, Louisiana, Oklahoma, South Carolina and West Virginia assign a support team to beginning teachers. Mississippi uses retired teachers and an expanding pool of nationally certified teachers as mentors. North Carolina is the only state that provides funding for two years of mentoring.

Principals and district leaders play key roles in establishing school environments that push teachers and students to do their best. Yet only 33 percent of middle grades teachers strongly agreed that their schools maintain that kind of environment. Effective leaders work with teachers to incorporate more demanding content into the curriculum and to ensure that more students are challenged academically. Yet only 28 percent of middle grades teachers strongly agreed that this happens at their schools; nearly a third of them do not feel they are encouraged to revise what they are teaching to better prepare students for high school.

> *"There are no real incentives to encourage leaders to put a well-qualified middle grades teacher in every classroom, and there are no real disincentives for those who fail to do so."*
>
> — A Southern legislator

There are few incentives or penalties that encourage districts and schools to recruit and assign the best qualified teachers to middle grades classrooms. However, states are beginning to develop more incentives and penalties. In 2003, Maryland will reduce grants to districts in which provisionally certified teachers account for more than 2 percent of all teachers. In Texas and Delaware, parents are notified within 30 days if their children are being taught by uncertified teachers. By 2006, Arkansas teachers no longer will be assigned to teach subjects for which they are not licensed.

Efforts to improve teacher preparation and licensure will affect about 5 percent to 6 percent of the teachers in classrooms each year. More than 90 percent of the teachers needed in the next 10 years already are in the classrooms and have met state guidelines. Yet these teachers also need help in upgrading content knowledge and in learning new and effective teaching strategies. States can take the actions described below to ensure that there is a qualified teacher in every middle grades classroom.

An action plan to improve teaching in the middle grades

A systematic, step-by-step approach may be the most useful and cost-effective way for states to provide all teachers with the tools they need to raise student achievement. The first steps could begin in low-performing schools, where the need is greatest.

Step 1:

Each state could begin with a middle grades institute that spans two summers and the school year between them for teachers at low-performing middle grades schools. This institute would be developed by the state's higher education agency, colleges and universities, the state department of education and school districts. The institute could provide academic work in a content area — mathematics, science, English/language arts or social studies — equivalent to a major or minor, combined with practice in how best to teach young adolescents. Teachers would receive stipends or tuition costs because they, in good faith, already have met state requirements. In Kentucky, legislation supports development of teacher academies in subject areas; teachers of core disciplines who lack majors or minors in those subjects will be given priority for participation in these academies.

Step 2:

Build upon what is learned from working with teachers at low-performing schools and expand the institutes to all middle grades teachers. The state's department of education and higher education agency could work together to support effective programs at colleges and universities that upgrade the academic content of middle grades teachers. Middle grades teachers could be offered stipends or other incentives to enroll in these programs and com-

plete academic majors or minors in their teaching fields. This step sends a very clear signal that the current preparation and certification process is inadequate and that the state will help teachers upgrade their content knowledge and teaching methods. It also gives the state's higher education agency and department of education a chance to work with colleges and universities to develop superior programs. By abolishing emergency teaching certificates, states could enact disincentives for districts that continue to assign teachers without content majors or minors to middle grades classrooms.

Step 3:

The body that sets professional standards for teaching in a state will need to establish new requirements for the preparation and certification of middle grades teachers. The revised procedures will need to define several pathways for middle grades certification. One pathway could be an alternative certification program that allows college graduates with an academic content major to enter the classroom with "on the job" training. Preparation and certification programs could include:

- a subject-specific certification for the middle grades with a major in an academic area or with dual minors in two academic areas;
- a high school certification with special provisions for those who want to teach in the middle grades to help them gain experience and understanding of how young adolescents learn; and
- an academic concentration that elementary majors could add that would prepare them to teach in an academic field in the middle grades.

Step 4:

A date should be established by which <u>all</u> teachers in the middle grades must meet the new preparation and certification requirements. Offering incentives, such as stipends or tuition costs for current teachers, tells teachers that the state recognizes that they already have met state standards but is raising the standards and will work with them to help them meet the new standards.

States may need to mount a special recruitment effort to interest more young people in becoming middle grades teachers. Each state may want to hire someone to work in the department of education who collaborates with the state's high schools and colleges to:

- encourage bright students to become teachers in the middle grades, particularly in mathematics and science;
- nurture prospective teachers through a four-year preparation program and the first years of teaching; and
- monitor incentive programs, such as a state program to forgive the student loans of teachers who teach in the middle grades for a specified amount of time.

Asking the right questions

There are three major areas in which state policies can help ensure that there is a well-qualified teacher in every classroom:

- incentives for schools and colleges to work together and improve content knowledge and teaching practices in the middle grades;
- recruitment, preparation and ongoing professional development to improve teacher quality in the middle grades; and
- a clear message through licensing and certification that teacher quality in the middle grades is an educational priority.

First, states should provide incentives for schools and colleges to work together to improve middle grades teachers' content background and understanding of how young adolescents learn best. Georgia found a clear difference between professional development in high-performing schools and in low-performing schools. In high-performing schools, principals and teachers plan professional development, which focuses on teaching, learning and improving student achievement. Florida, Louisiana and North Carolina are using professional-development academies to enhance teacher quality. Arkansas is extending its Smart Start program, which provides extra training for teachers of kindergarten through grade four, to teachers of the middle grades. The Maryland Reading Network is in its second year of focusing on reading programs in the middle grades. The network holds a series of meetings for middle grades teams to plan ways to improve instruction. The Alabama Reading Initiative is expanding into the middle grades and requires schools to develop partnerships with colleges and universities. *What is your state doing to improve teacher quality in the middle grades?*

Second, states need to find ways to recruit, prepare and retain more outstanding teachers in the middle grades. One teacher preparation program describes its efforts at redesign in this way:

> *"We had to change what we were teaching in our preparation program. We surveyed our graduates a year after they graduated and asked them, 'What did you need that we did not give you?' We now provide 30 weeks of student teaching with young adolescents in urban, suburban and rural schools and a special emphasis on content-based teaching strategies, classroom management, and how to adapt teaching to special needs. Our faculty had to change all of their courses to better meet the content and teaching needs of modern teachers."*
>
> — Dean, School of Education, Samford University

More than 60 percent of middle grades teachers reported on the spring 2000 survey that professional-development programs do not provide enough follow-up activities, such as observation of and feedback about their teaching. Ongoing partnerships between colleges and schools — such as those that Georgia and Kentucky are developing — clearly focus on finding, preparing and retaining well-qualified teachers. *How is your state recruiting, preparing and retaining the "best and brightest" teachers in the middle grades?*

Finally, state policies and practices can communicate the critical importance of having a well-qualified teacher in every middle grades classroom. The problem is that middle grades teachers are prepared either to teach content (those with secondary certificates) or to teach children (those with elementary certificates). Rarely are they prepared to teach both challenging content and young adolescents. In most states, the licensing/certification system for middle grades teachers allows teachers to be assigned to jobs for which they may not be prepared. Even states that have upgraded content preparation allow teachers to teach one or two periods a day in subjects that they did not study in depth.

A new day has arrived. Young adolescents leaving the middle grades must be ready for new curricula and more rigorous standards in high school. *Is your state sending a clear message that well-qualified teachers in the middle grades matter?*

Rate Your State's and District's Commitment to Having a Well-qualified Teacher in Every Middle Grades Classroom

Indicator	Yes	Somewhat	No
Does the state try to develop interest in a teaching career during the middle grades years by emphasizing the importance of taking college-preparatory courses and of succeeding academically?			
Does the state provide scholarships and stipends to help talented students complete a teacher preparation program that sets performance standards for beginning teachers?			
Does the state forgive student loans or provide bonuses to teacher candidates who commit to teaching in schools and subject areas in which there are teacher shortages?			
Do state policies encourage college graduates without teaching licenses to enter the teaching profession through alternative certification?			
Before and after they are employed as teachers, are candidates for alternative certification supported with instruction and demonstrations of research-based teaching skills?			
Does the state require teacher candidates for the middle grades to have varied, supervised teaching experiences with middle grades students?			
Do new teachers in the middle grades demonstrate content mastery in a subject area by earning majors and completing portfolios of work, oral presentations and/or tests?			
Does the state require subject-specific teaching licenses in the middle grades?			
Do schools and districts notify parents if teachers are not qualified in the subjects they are teaching?			
Do state funds support programs for beginning teachers that provide help during the first years of teaching?			
Does the state fund master teachers to guide beginning teachers and help them perform more effectively?			
Does the state support and encourage district and school partnerships with colleges and universities to update middle grades teachers' content knowledge and teaching skills through professional development designed to raise student achievement?			
Are districts and schools required to have professional-development plans that account for how funds are spent and how spending supports higher standards for content and performance?			